

## South Mountain Freeway plan weighed by Gila River tribe

by **Cathryn Creno** - Jan. 16, 2011 07:53 PM  
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Moving the route of the planned South Mountain Freeway from Ahwatukee Foothills and the South Mountain Preserve to the Gila River Reservation would save part of the mountain range, protect wildlife and create new economic opportunities, according to a presentation being given by tribal officials to their community this month.

The planned \$1.9 billion extension of Loop 202 would link west Phoenix to Chandler with a 22-mile eight-lane freeway.

Alia Maisonet, spokeswoman for the Gila River Indian Community Tribal Council, said that since December tribal-community members have had the opportunity to attend meetings at which they can voice views and ask questions about a possible route on reservation land.

The meetings, open only to tribal members, will continue until February, she said. After that, the council could vote to approve the freeway or put the issue on a ballot for the community to decide.

If the freeway is built on tribal land, the Arizona Department of Transportation would still be in charge of its construction and **funding** for it would still be managed by the Maricopa Association of Governments, said MAG senior engineer Robert Hazlett.

Ahwatukee residents who have opposed

having the freeway cut through their community and the mountain have voiced support and relief that tribe members are talking about allowing the freeway on their land.

"We should be thankful that they are willing to take a look at the freeway," said Mike Hinz, a member of the Ahwatukee Foothills Village Planning Committee and the ADOT's South Mountain **Citizens** Advisory Team.

If approved by the tribe, the new route would run south from 51st Avenue in Phoenix past Pecos Road and onto Gila River land. It would connect with the eastern edge of Loop 202 just beyond 48th Street and Pecos Road.

Most of the route would be one-quarter to one-half mile south of Pecos Road, Hazlett said.

Hazlett said the new route would be an at-grade freeway with exits at 51st Avenue, 17th Avenue, Desert Foothills Parkway, 24th Street and 40th Street. There also would be wildlife crossings at 51st and 17th avenues.

The current route calls for the freeway to run southwest from 59th Avenue, requiring

the destruction of three mountain ridges in the preserve, then along Pecos Road in Ahwatukee.

The Pecos route would take out a church and more than 100 homes in Ahwatukee.

In addition to **saving** the mountain and wildlife, tribal members are being told that having the freeway on their land would give them more control over how the freeway is built and would also divert heavy traffic away from the reservation, something that has been a problem around 51st Avenue.

Tribal officials, including Gov. William Rhodes, have said the primary motivation for the freeway talks is not economic. Rather, they are interested in protecting South Mountain.

Maisonet said many tribal residents "are opposed to a freeway, period."

"They don't want it on the reservation or anywhere else," she said.

Sandy Bahr, director of the Sierra Club's Grand Canyon Chapter in Phoenix and a member of ADOT's citizens advisory committee, said her group feels the same way.

While the new plan would save houses and the mountain range, it would still bring freeway noise and air pollution into an area that is filled with wildlife habitats, she said.

"We've always questioned the need for the freeway," Bahr said. Freeway planners, however, say the freeway extension is needed to relieve traffic congestion on Interstate 10. Plans for it have been in the works since at least the 1980s.

Ahwatukee resident and longtime freeway opponent, Laurel Arndt, said she hopes the Gila River Indian Community will demand more comprehensive environmental-impact reports than have been made available so far. Many freeway opponents still have questions about noise and air-quality problems they fear the freeway would generate.

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